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S E R M O N,

Preached on the 21st of MAY, 1786,

In the PARISH-CHURCH of
HARDINGSTONE, in the County of *Northampton*,

On the Establishment of a

SUNDAY SCHOOL

AT THAT PLACE,

For the Benefit of the Children of the Poor.

By the Rev. R O B E R T L U C A S.

Printed for J. ROBSON, New Bond-Street, London.

M,DCC,LXXXVI.

1601/621.



A SERMON, &c.

MARK, Chap. x. Ver. 14.

Suffer the little children to come unto me and forbid them not.

THE evangelists inform us, that, while our saviour was in the coasts of Judea, *teaching the people as he was wont to do*, some well-disposed persons, struck with the divinity of his character, and earnest for the happiness of their tender offspring, *brought young children to Christ that he should touch them, and confer some blessing upon them.* But, his disciples, thinking probably that it was a needless intrusion on that time, which their divine master was employing to more important purposes, *rebuked the persons who brought them.* Jesus, whose eyes were watchful of the multitude that surrounded him, perceived this; and showing much displeasure, that those who appeared so earnest to manifest their faith and attachment should be repulsed, he demanded, with benevolent authority, a passage for them, in the words of the text, *Suffer the little children to come unto me and forbid them not*; and, *taking them up in his arms, he put his hands upon them and blessed them.*

This remarkable occurrence, at the same time that it displays the

the benevolence of our Lord's disposition in the most pleasing colours, furnishes us also with this instructive lesson, that we cannot too soon be presented unto Christ; that we can never too early apply for the blessings he is able to bestow; that, if we approach him with earnestness and faith, all obstacles that may at first oppose our progress shall be wholly removed, and we shall not fail to reach the object of our pursuit, and obtain the blessing we desire.

Perfuated that we cannot too soon be thrown into the arms of Christ, our church has wisely employed this incident in commendation of infant baptism. But if, while the objects of our affection are unconscious of the blessing imparted, it be our duty to lose no time in presenting them unto the Lord; it will be no less incumbent upon us to promote the same spiritual communication, when they are capable of receiving such religious instruction as may operate with advantage on their future conduct: when the infant mind begins to expand and offers itself alike to the impressions of virtue and of vice, it becomes us to be unusually careful of our charge, and omit no opportunity of presenting it unto the Lord for instruction, in order that we may effectually establish sentiments of piety and virtue, to the utter exclusion of such as are impious and vicious. Then, although our offspring have not the power, like those mentioned in the text, of reaching the visible person of Christ, they will receive all the blessed effects of his divine presence, in the effectual knowledge they will obtain of his will; and in the consequent performance of all the duties enjoined by that holy religion, which he appeared on earth to establish.

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The benefits and advantages, to be derived from a religious education, will be obvious to every one, who looks but slightly into the nature and constitution of our frame. Subject to the impulse of the various passions that are implanted in us, we need all the correction of precept and discipline to oppose their power. Surrounded with temptations, and seduced by the examples of the profligate and wicked, it needs all the resolution that can possibly be excited by a deep sense of duty to resist, and retain our innocence. But, this efficient sense of duty can only be obtained by the earliest impressions of religion and virtue on the mind, yet unsubdued by the power of vice and iniquity. What numberless victims to this power, disgraceful to the christian world! do we not perpetually observe and lament? Wretches, who owe their misery and fate to the neglect of those opportunities of instruction, which might have been embraced in their younger years. Unchecked by the necessary discipline of religion, unrestrained by any sense of shame or remorse, corrupt and uncorrected nature hurries them on from vice to vice, from crime to crime, and determines their career only in their destruction. Whereas such as are *trained up in the way they should go*, such as have been early inured to the habitual practice of their duty, go forth, into the busy scenes of life, well prepared to resist, or to elude, the dangers that surround them. Amidst all their avocations and employments, religion will assert its power in their hearts, and preserve them from the destructive effects of vice and impiety.

If we wish, therefore, that our offspring, in their riper years, should produce any valuable fruit, such as will be beneficial either

to themselves or others, the seed of that fruit must be sowed in their tender years, when the ground is unoccupied and properly prepared for its reception. If it be *then* neglected, the seeds of vice will inevitably get possession of it; and, taking root therein, will despoil it of every valuable quality, and render it, not only useless, but destructive to the owner.

But, obvious as the benefits of a virtuous and christian education are, it is to be lamented, that the means of obtaining it are not always in the possession of our indigent brethren. The children of the poor are often exposed to all the danger of bad habits, without any parental care to watch and correct them; without any of that discipline, which is so necessary to preserve their innocence. I am sensible that, in a christian country, like this, where so many opportunities offer themselves to persons of all denominations of knowing their duty, that excellent one, in particular, which the sabbath so repeatedly affords, the poorest among us may obtain useful instruction in every relation of life. But, it is a lamentable truth, that the children of many of the poor are suffered to grow up in an habitual neglect of these opportunities; in which they are often not a little encouraged by the examples of their parents.

That torpid state of mind, that habitual sloth which prevails among them, may, in some measure, account for this shameful indifference, as to the conduct of their children: ignorant themselves and negligent of their various duties, we cannot wonder that this of attending to their children's improvement should be
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on the same footing with the rest. Unconscious of the blessings of a decent and religious education, they feel no impulse to look out for means to impart it to their offspring; who are suffered to run wild in the community, unchecked by any sense but the dread of corporal punishment. If this dread should fortunately preserve them from very atrocious conduct, we see them pass their lives in a mental stupidity, totally unworthy the great endowments of our nature; the lamp of reason scarcely alive in them; and their various duties so obscured as to be wholly hidden from their view.

But, is this a condition worthy the privileges of our nature? Is this worthy of beings, who are capable of rendering God a reasonable service? Of obtaining, by proper discipline, so clear a knowledge of their duty, as cheerfully to perform it, not from the base dread of punishment, but from a persuasion of its expedience and rectitude?---From whatever cause, therefore, this condition of the poor arises; whether from wilful ignorance, or their inability to alter it; it is, undoubtedly, the part of all those, on whom providence has bestowed the means, to remedy the evil, if possible, in the rising generation.

Away, then, with those selfish notions, which would repress the generous struggles of the poor man's mind after information and instruction; that would bar the gates of knowledge against him, nor suffer one ray to enliven the gloom which surrounds him. Because providence has thought good to place some in a helpless and forlorn situation, shall we deny them the consolation of knowing, from the operations of their own minds, that they are
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reasonable creatures? Because we want the labour of their hands, and perhaps the confinement of their bodies, shall we imprison their minds also? Nor suffer them to escape from the dungeon-gloom of ignorance, into the unconfined and cheering light of knowledge and of truth? Shall we refuse to lighten their present burthens by affording them a consciousness of their native worth; and that, however depressed their condition now is, yet, in the scale of created beings, in the benevolent eye of providence, they are upon a footing with the greatest, and most exalted, among men? That, if they act well the part that is allotted them, they have equal pretensions to future happiness and immortality?

These are reflections which administer comfort and consolation to the poor, and greatly alleviate the burthens, which their condition inevitably lays upon them; nor ought we to withhold the knowledge of the privileges they possess in common with others, their fellow creatures.

But it is, truly, a strange idea (adopted however by some) which supposes that knowledge, arising from a decent education, indisposes the poor for their respective callings. How the knowledge of a man's duty should indispose him for the performance of it, is a problem not easily solved: for, I may appeal to the experience of those who hear me, whether such among the poor, as embrace all opportunities of acquiring the knowledge of their duty, are not found to perform that duty, how laborious soever it may be, better for their employers, more beneficially for their families, and with more cheerfulness and satisfaction to themselves, than such as wilfully neglect the opportunities that offer
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of enlightening their minds by instruction and knowledge.---It is, unquestionably, therefore, our bounden duty, to obtain for the poor all possible opportunities of acquiring a decent and religious education.

But, numerous as are the Charity Schools, established for this benevolent purpose, in various parts of the kingdom, their influence cannot possibly extend so wide as the necessities of the poor, and the exigencies of the case, require. Their benefits are usually confined to a small part of the poor of the metropolis, of the more opulent cities and market towns; while the children of the village are overlooked, and suffered to grow up in ignorance and vice, without one effort to implant the seeds of virtue and religion in their hearts; without one ray of knowledge to enliven their passage through this vale of tears. We have to lament, therefore, that the most liberal institutions, already established, which owe their support to voluntary contributions, do not spread wide enough in their influence, and are wholly incompetent to reach, with any efficacy, the general mass of the poor. These still remain overwhelmed in a sort of hereditary ignorance and sloth; still uninstructed to avoid the paths of vice; still averse from the performance of the duty they owe to the Supreme Being, and to Society.---A condition, surely, like this, calls loudly upon us for generous and benevolent exertions, and urges us to adopt any probable mode of affording sufficient relief.

But, by what methods, it may be asked, will you be able to accomplish a work, the magnitude and difficulty of which seem

to discourage every hope of success?---That a reformation will be effected in those, who have long been accustomed to the ways of sin, we do not presume to expect; but, that something may be done for preventing the rising generation's following the evil example of their parents, is, by no means, to be despaired of.

Happily for the poor, happily for ourselves, the suggestions of some benevolent heart have given birth to a scheme, that promises the best and most extensive effects! You will readily conceive that I allude to the establishment of SUNDAY SCHOOLS: an institution, that calls upon us for encouragement, by the weightiest motives that can influence the heart of a good christian. X For, what duty is more pressed upon us, by our holy religion; what, more strongly sanctioned and supported, than that, which obliges us to relieve the wants, and minister to the temporal and spiritual welfare, of our fellow creatures? If, to promote order and decency in the community; if, to enlighten the ignorant with divine knowledge; if, to preserve the innocent from destruction, by spreading over them the armour of righteousness, be the duty of a christian; then, do these institutions demand our attention and support; since they afford us the most pleasing hopes of succeeding in the accomplishment of these valuable works.

For, the advantages attending *these Institutions* are such, as cannot be reached by any other of the like kind. Their influence is unlimited; their benevolent arms are thrown out to embrace all that are rejected, or overlooked, by other charities; all such as have no parents to guide their infant steps; or such only, as wholly neglect them. These necessitous children, however, will,
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when they grow up, form the main body of the people: and hence, the good effects of these institutions will reach to the very heart of the disorder; and, by operating on the general mass of the poor, will be felt, with advantage, by the whole community.

Their object is not to make *scholars* of the children of the poor, but *good christians, and useful members of society*: it is to introduce among them a decent and orderly deportment; and, particularly, a becoming observance of the sabbath; an habitual neglect of which is, unquestionably, the foundation of all those crimes, which so greatly, and so justly, alarm the minds of the public.

For, what does the neglect of the sabbath, among the poor, imply? Does it not imply an abandonment of almost the only means of being informed of their duty? If the younger poor do not attend the public ordinances and instructions of that day; let me ask---where will they obtain a knowledge of what they are to practise? Will it be acquired at their respective homes? Happy for the children it is, if the example of their parents do not rather encourage them in evil. Instead of guiding them with parental authority in their various duties, their conduct too often spreads a pernicious influence among their offspring; who grow up, fitted only to continue the same to their posterity.

I am convinced that many of the poor do their duty well, in the station God has allotted them; and are anxious to bring up their children in an orderly and becoming manner. Such are seldom unrewarded, even in this life: for, surely, no greater
pleasure

pleasure can be infused into a parental breast, than that which is derived from the dutiful and commendable conduct of a beloved child. But, of the greater number, we cannot thus make our boast: and, it is to relieve the children from the deplorable circumstances that must accompany the inability of their parents to instruct them, or the wilful omission and negligence of their duty, that *Sunday Schools* were proposed and established. Their intention is to collect all the children of the poor, without limitation, into one body; all such, at least, as are capable of instruction; and, after spending some time in reading, to conduct them to the public worship of Almighty God, at the parish-church; where they may become acquainted with their duty, and urged to the practice of it. By these means, such as have been accustomed to spend the sabbath, if not in mischief, at least in negligence and sloth, will be brought to observe it in a manner becoming christians. It is the habitual neglect of our duty that makes the performance of it so irksome to us: but, early inured to decent and regular conduct, and strongly impressed with a sense of their various duties, by an habitual observance of the Lord's day, the children of the poor will grow up in industry, sobriety, and godliness; will become blessings to themselves and families, worthy and valuable members of the community.

Such are the benefits which may be derived from these sunday institutions. Wherever they have been established, they are found to answer every expectation. The idea of their usefulness seems now to be pretty generally diffused, and, in various parts of the kingdom, the good work is begun; and will, no doubt, grow apace:

apace: nay, there is reason to hope that, in time, it will be *universal*; when every parish, throughout the kingdom, will have its little Seminary, consecrated to Decency and Holiness; where, the eye of the christian may be gratified with the pleasing sight of those, who, instead of becoming victims of sloth and vice, are training up to cleanliness, decorum, and the service of God.

Nor, is the hope of these schools being *universal*, by any means, visionary. For, notwithstanding the abundant good that may reasonably be expected from them, the expence, which attends their establishment and future support, is so small, that no obstacles can present themselves, on that account, to obstruct their progress; none, at least, but what the common feelings of humanity, the most moderate love of our fellow-creatures, will readily combat and overthrow. In most of the towns and villages, throughout the kingdom, some will be found, whose benevolent feelings will urge them to promote, within their respective parishes, these excellent institutions; and little else is wanting, besides bringing the matter before the charitable and humane.*

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* It is manifest, that the first steps in this business cannot be taken by any, with so much propriety, nor, in general, with so much efficacy, as by the Clergy: they have already shown a becoming jealousy, lest it should be taken up by any other than themselves; and will, no doubt, continue to push forward the prevalence of so excellent a work. Whether they succeed or not (and in some parishes insuperable difficulties may arise) they will have the satisfaction of endeavouring, at least, to promote the service of God, and the good order and welfare of society. But, in most places, I am persuaded they may have the happiness of congregating, not only the children of the *industrious* poor, but the *very abjects* and *castaways*, into the fold of Christ; and, thereby, obtaining for themselves an opportunity of effecting one of their most essential duties, that of PREACHING THE GOSPEL TO THE POOR; to such of them, likewise, as are most in need of its divine influence.

In those places, where they have already been established, the mode of supporting them has usually been, *by voluntary subscriptions*; and, where the parish is numerous and opulent (as in market-towns) this is, undoubtedly, the more eligible way. But, in *villages*, where such of the inhabitants, as are likely to contribute, are chiefly occupiers of land, the more equal mode of defraying the expence would be out of the *parish levy*: when, all those, who are principally concerned in the industry, good conduct and honesty of the poor, would pay something towards their amendment; and that, in proportion to the land in their occupation. The charge, distributed thus among so many, would have so trifling an effect upon their rates, as to be scarcely perceptible by any of them. In those villages, where the affairs of the parish are conducted with unanimity, there can be no possible objection to this mode; and, even in such, as have been accustomed to bickerings and disputes, they might, surely, for once, be thrown aside, when the common cause of humanity is concerned; and when the good, and, eventually, even the *interest* of all, is intended to be promoted. But, whatever mode be adopted, whether by levy or subscription, the charge of maintaining these schools is so small, that the objection will not stand a moment before the benefits that will arise from them.*

Happily, however, for the poor of *this parish*, objections to the establishment of a Sunday School, here, have found no place among

* The mode, however, by levy, need not exclude, or check, the contributions of any opulent families, that may be resident in villages. *Their* assistance would still lessen the small charge on the parish. A benevolent neighbour has generously offered to supply the school at Hardingstone with *books*.

among us. Those, who pay to the *rates*, have generously and unanimously agreed to support one: and, it reflects no small share of credit upon them, that they have been thus forward to contribute, in the manner proposed, to the benefit of their fellow-creatures, and to promote order, decency and religion, in the community. Nay, I question, whether they be not the very first, who have established a SUNDAY SCHOOL, BY PAROCHIAL LEVY:---an example, highly worthy of imitation by other parishes; and which points out, perhaps, the only mode of rendering these institutions universal, through the kingdom: an event, much to be desired!

Under these fortunate circumstances, I would, now, particularly address myself to that part of my audience, who are capable of reaping the chief benefits and advantages that are offered.

Means are now held out to you of affording your children, not a *learned* education, but one, decent, christian-like, and becoming the station providence has allotted them. Such of the poor, as are careful to educate their offspring in the best manner their circumstances will allow, will be glad to seize this opportunity of adding something to their own endeavours. But, such as, from various causes, are shamefully careless of the conduct of their children, and suffer them to grow up in habits of idleness and profaneness, and in a total neglect of the sabbath; such, I trust, will eagerly embrace these benevolent offers; which promise to lead their tender offspring into the knowledge of their duty, both as christians and as men; and into those habits and resolutions,
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that will best secure them a comfortable subsistence here, and eternal happiness hereafter. Such persons, indeed, must be lost to all parental affection, if they do not regard these offers with comfort and satisfaction; if sensations of gratitude do not spring up in their hearts, not only to their benefactors, but to God himself, for the opportunity he has graciously afforded them of dedicating their children to his service.

Invited, therefore, as they are, to present them unto the Lord; if they refuse, or neglect, to do it, they will become more obnoxious to the displeasure of their divine master, than those mentioned in the gospel, who obstructed the children that sought the presence of Christ. With *them*, instant obedience followed the disclosure of his will: and shall we, in our days, behold any who dare to disregard that authoritative voice, which still affectionately speaks, "*Suffer the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not?*"---Those parents that are spoken of in this remarkable occurrence, though discouraged and repulsed, pressed forward to the presence of their Lord, and at length obtained the blessings they sought. But, if these could overcome all the opposition that met their pious purpose; surely, such as now have children, that need, as much as their's, the blessing of the Lord, and which is still attainable, will not neglect to press forward in the road that lies open for them; where no obstructions present themselves; where none stand, *to rebuke those that bring them.*

These considerations, I trust, will have their due weight. The advantages of these institutions will be as obvious to the
poor,

poor, as they are to others; and they will, doubtless, exert their parental authority so, as that the children may not escape their benevolent intentions. Much, certainly, will depend on regular attendance: slight excuses must not find admission. Then, assisted with the blessing of Almighty God, without which, all our efforts will be in vain, I doubt not, but we shall see a numerous flock training up *in the nurture and admonition of the Lord*; shall see the sabbath observed by them in a profitable and becoming manner, and habits of sobriety and good conduct growing as they grow, and so taking root in them, as not easily to be overcome in their riper years.

I shall conclude with observing, that parents are, by no means, to imagine, that all care, respecting the education and good conduct of their children, is, by this institution, taken out of their hands, and that they need give themselves no further trouble on that score. They ought to assure themselves, that the important obligation they are under, of attending to the conduct and improvement of their offspring, remains still upon them in its full force, and can never be shaken off by them: it will ever be their duty, by precept, and by example, to co-operate with this school, in its godly and benevolent *intention*; since it is no other, than to promote *the temporal and eternal welfare of their children!*

THE END.

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The author has the satisfaction of adding, that, in the course of a week, no fewer than NINETY-FOUR children were brought by their parents to be entered as *scholars*; and, on the succeeding Sunday, he had the happiness of seeing them attend divine service in an orderly and becoming manner; clean, in their persons, and more decent, in their apparel, than could have been expected.--- Nor, is it, by any means, the least of the advantages attending these institutions, that they produce, among the poor, a new and powerful incitement to pay attention to the personal cleanliness and decent appearance of their children: circumstances, by too many, at present, wholly neglected.



RULES *for the* SUNDAY SCHOOL *established*
at HARDINGSTONE, *for the benefit of the*
children of the Poor.

I.

THAT the master and mistress of the said school be allowed 2s. per week, for their regular attendance thereon.*

II.

That all children, from 6 years old and upwards, *resident* in the said parish, be proper objects of this institution.

III.

That the names of the children, who become scholars, shall be entered in a book, and called over every Sunday, that their due attendance may be the better secured.

IV.

That the times of assembling, every Sunday, in the school room, be as follow;---when divine service is in the morning, the children are to meet at half past eight o'clock, and stay till eleven; the master and mistress are then to conduct them to church: when divine service is not in the morning, they are to meet at half past nine, in the school room, and stay till twelve. They are to meet again at two o'clock in the afternoon, and stay till four: but if service be in the afternoon, the children are to be conducted to church, and stay at school two hours after service is over.

V.

That the master and mistress take care that the children go to Church in an orderly manner, two and two, the girls all preceding the boys; and that they be careful that their behaviour, when at Church, be such as is becoming.

VI.

That the said master and mistress, during the school hours, do teach

* The school is so numerous that an assistant is also engaged.

teach the children to read, (and, if required, to write) and also to repeat the church catechism.

VII.

That books be provided, for the children to read in; particularly spelling-books and testaments: other proper books to be provided for such as recommend themselves by diligence and improvement.

VIII.

That the parents of the said children do not suffer them to absent themselves from school at any of the stated times, unless for very substantial reasons; and that they be careful to send them clean and in decent apparel.

IX.

That the minister, church-wardens and overseers of the said parish be appointed the managers of the said school.

X.

That when the parents or friends of any of the children wish them to quit the school, they are to give notice thereof to one of the managers, a week, at least, before the time of quitting.

XI.

That three of the said managers may dismiss any of the children for improper behaviour.

XII.

That the expences attending the said school be paid by parish levy.

The general usefulness of the school would be considerably secured, if the more reputable inhabitants would pay attention to the management of it, by frequent visitations, and promote the regular attendance of the children, as much as lies in their power.

